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The Gospel and Australian Culture, Part 1

Contextualization is about “how the Gospel and culture relate to one another across geographic space and down through time” (Whiteman 1997:2). But as well as being about communicating the gospel in ways that make “sense to people within their local cultural context,” Darrell Whiteman argues that “good contextualization offends.” This is not due to cultural offense, but rather, when the gospel is shared and the church organized “along appropriate cultural patterns . . . people will more likely be confronted with the offense of the Gospel, exposing their own sinfulness and the tendency toward evil, oppressive structures and behavior patterns within their culture” (1997:3). Such contextualized expressions are prophetic, expanding the ways in which the gospel is understood and the kingdom of God experienced.

While forms of organization that reflect both cultural patterns and the tri-unity of God cannot be neglected if the church is to be effective in sharing the gospel in post-Christendom societies, those must be the subject of another paper. In this article I will focus upon contextualized expressions of the gospel message in post-Christendom societies, with specific reference to Australian culture. Readers from other post-Christendom societies will identify a frame and process in this study, for their own environments. It is my contention that countercultural expressions of the gospel most constructively confront post-Christendom communities.

After reviewing Stephen Bevans’ models of contextual theology I will use Paul Hiebert’s four steps of “critical contextualization” (Hiebert 1987:109-110) as my outline. Part 1 will review Bevans’ models and explore the first of Hiebert’s steps—an exegesis of Australia’s cultural trends. Part 2 will explore steps (1) reflection upon the biblical message of the gospel to be contextualized, (2) an analysis of convergence and dissonance between the gospel and Australian culture, and (3) suggestions for fresh symbols and rituals to communicate the gospel in forms indigenous to Australian culture.

Contextual Theology and the Countercultural Model

Context shapes our thinking in ways we do not realize. It is therefore imperative that attempts to understand and communicate the Christian faith take this into account. Whereas classical theology has been “a kind of objective science” based on two *loci theologici* (scripture and tradition for Roman Catholics; and scripture and understandings developed around scripture, for Protestants), contextual theology also recognizes the validity of “present human experience” (Bevans 2007:4). While this changes “the whole equation” (2007:5) for Scripture and associated interpretations are themselves products of cultural contexts, Bevans argues that this recognition is essential for an “authentic theology” (2007:5) and that “there is only contextual theology” (2007:3).

Each context is complex, representing a mix of several realities. This means that laying down “the absolutes of biblical faith . . . as a standard” (Wiklander 2006:122) cannot get away from the reality that Scripture, which was written within a variety of contexts, is always interpreted within another, and delivered to another, the recipient context. Bevans proposes six models of contextual theology as a way to think about “the interaction of the gospel message and culture” (Bevans 2007:ix).

Table 1. Models of Contextual Theology

Models	Description
Translation	The unchanging Scripture message is adapted using context as the vehicle for a dynamic-equivalence translation
Anthropological	God’s revelation and grace is found as “seeds of the Word” within each context, with Scripture serving as a map
Praxis	God’s presence and revelation is seen in activity—as a way of living
Synthetic	A synthesis of all models—in dialogue with the message of Scripture and all aspects of the diverse changing human contexts
Transcendental	God is revealed in the authentic, converted, faithful, subjective experience of personal and communal understanding
Countercultural	While the context is taken very seriously, the gospel needs to challenge, encounter, engage, contrast with, and purify context

While these models are not exclusive of each other, some function more adequately within certain circumstances. Also, according to context, specific expressions of faith may represent different models. While within a monotheistic context, a consistent public prayer life may be seen as translation or anthropological; and while humility and deep spirituality

may be synthetic and transcendental within a Buddhist context; these expressions of faith are countercultural-praxis within a secular, postmodern and post-Christendom Australian context.

While emphasizing the validity of each model, and highlighting how the transcendental model makes it possible for the gospel to be heard in postmodernity, Bevans acknowledges the particular relevance of the praxis and countercultural models for secularized and postmodern environments. Their value for the Australian context is found in their presuppositions. The countercultural model seriously engages the context, but is also suspicious of it. It is not *anticultural*, nor a reflection of Niebuhr's "Christ against Culture," and it does not regard context as needing "to be replaced with a purer religious one" (Bevans 2007:119). However, it challenges, encounters, engages and confesses the gospel "as an alternative worldview in a hostile and indifferent culture" (2007:119). It presupposes that (1) the human context is ambiguous and insufficient; (2) the story of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is "the clue to history" and the future; (3) the alternate option of a "community of character" based on the Christian beatitudes, not the "unprovable 'values'" of western pagan society; and (4) the gospel engages our context through church communities, transformed by this gospel, and seen in authentic Christian practice (2007:120-124).

Bevans' conclusion that the praxis model of contextual theology is not done "simply by providing relevant expressions of Christian faith but also by commitment to Christian action" (2007:72) extends the fourth presupposition of the countercultural model. Theology is a process or activity, "a way of living" (2007:74). The countercultural model will be specifically used as a basis for reflecting upon the interaction of the gospel message with Australia's cultural trends.

Analyzing Australian Cultural Trends

Consistent with Hiebert's critical contextualization process, the countercultural model suggests that contextual theology is best done by first analyzing the context, for only a theology that critically engages the context can faithfully present and live out the gospel. It is therefore not my purpose here to collate statistics, but rather to identify and analyze observable trends in Australian post-Christendom culture and the forecasts of generational demographics.

Australia has been described as "a land of enigmas and contradictions" (Garvin 1987:11). With 24 percent of the population born overseas (ABS 2006), being Australian is clearly not determined by facial features, skin color, or first language, but has to do "with a state of heart and mind committed to a unique future" within which "we find our spiritual bearings" (Garvin 1987:14). Manning Clark described this as "a whisper in the mind

and a shy hope in the heart" (Clark 2006:2).

While at first it seems strange to suggest that "a shy hope" is a defining quality of Australian identity, it is consistent with the idea of the *Australian dream*—something that is hoped for! It is expressed in the quiet (even shy) way in which Australians have greeted each other with, "'G'day. How ya going?" It presses the question asked by Donald Horne in 1964, "What is an Australian?" (25). Reflection upon his answer provides the basis for a comparative study, demonstrating clear cultural trends.

The Lucky Country—1964

In the mid-1960s Australia was a stable society with a high level and expectation of home ownership. Horne identified Australians at that time with the three expressions: (1) *fair go, mate*; (2) *having a good time*; and (3) *give it a go*. Inherent in the exclamation, "*Fair go, mate!*" was an "expectant distrust," non-competitive mate-ship, as well as the pressure to conform. Horne saw Australians as tolerant and suspicious—not caring unless it involved them, but wondering "what's he after?"

While he detected "no centre" to Australian society, *having a good time* was what life was about, with sport being life "and the rest a shadow." He identified a "deeply inlaid skepticism" as perhaps "the most pervasive single influence." He saw Australians as practical, experimental, and with little continuity with a past, ready to adapt and change—"a largely non-contemplative people," but ready to *give it a go*, especially with the added encouragement, "she'll be right."

Horne's 1964 snapshot provides just one point of contrast with our present situation. While he saw changes coming, he could not have foreseen the extent to which societal issues he considered major would be re-defined. However, it is those factors that were not high on his agenda, but are now central to the Australian context, that indicate the most significant societal trends. These include:

1. *Indigenous culture and spirituality*: The heritage of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders has gained ascendancy in Australian consciousness. While professing a *fair go* for all, Aborigines—along with gays, feminists, and religious minorities—have been subject to societal bullying. The Bringing Them Home Report (1997) did more than raise awareness of the suffering of the *stolen generation*. It drew attention to their dispossession, the genocide suffered, as well as further exposing the myth of Australian egalitarianism. The 2008 National Sorry Day was widely supported, indicating a commitment to reconciliation, and a growing appreciation of Aboriginal indigenous traditions, spirituality, and connectedness with the land. At the same time, legislated antidiscrimination and tolerance—to ensure all are treated equally regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity,

age, disability, or sexual preference—represents a most significant transformation in Australian culture.

2. *The environment and urbanization*: Aboriginal people lived in harmony with the land and bush for millennia, but migrant settlers struggled to “convert” the bush and retreated to the friendlier coastal environs. Most Australians have not been to Uluru (Ayres Rock), crossed the Nullabor Plain, fished on the banks of the Murray-Darling, or recited bush poetry. However, they have become aware of the synergy between country and city as a result of drought and depleted water resources, their economic reliance upon mining, and the impact of greenhouse gas emissions and global warming on the environment, with major social and economic implications.

3. *Multiculturalism and diversity*: Australia is a migrant nation. While the pre-Vietnam White Australia policy ensured an essentially European and Christian character to the culture, policy changes opened the door to economic and political refugees as well as asylum seekers—contributing to the current ethnic and religious diversity. One does not have to be born in Australia to be a *true blue* patriotic. A rich variety of ethnicity, languages, cuisine, sports, entertainment, dress, customs, spiritualities, religions, household, and family options are now seen as Australian. At times the harmony of such diverse elements is exposed as fragile, as experienced in racial violence at Cronulla beach on December 11, 2005; however, ethnic and religious groups have made the transition to Australian culture with little conflict.

4. *Nationalism and ANZAC*: Regardless of where they have come from, there is an uncanny uniformity of expectations with most thinking of themselves as mainline, decent, average Australians. Perhaps, because of their diverse backgrounds, Australians hold their national identity lightly. Many have experienced the horror and cruelty unleashed in the name of nationalism, and they are happy to simply savor being Australian rather than trying to define it. An Englishman, Douglas Adams, observes that because they have traveled or migrated to Australia, they know that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence for “Australia is, in fact, the other side of that fence” (Adams 2008). Growing participation in ANZAC day services is a celebration of this. And although the debate over becoming a republic will return to the political agenda, this may suggest that regardless of the design of the flag or the nationality of the Head of State, freedom, peace, and democracy are those qualities cherished.

5. *Terrorism and security*: Terrorism came home with the Bali bombings on October 12, 2002—“sometimes called ‘Australia’s September 11’” (AFP 2002)—because of the numbers of Australians killed. These events forever changed national security procedures, while community attitudes toward

security had been changing due to reports of crime and assault. Homes have become private places of refuge and retreat.

6. *Sport and the arts*: The weather in Australia draws many to outdoor activities. Sport is an equalizer, turning the culture upside down, bringing teams and heroes together from diverse backgrounds. These events provide one of the few opportunities for fellow Australians to hear their national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*. However, Horne's 1964 assessment that "sport is life to most Australians" (37) is not true today, if it ever was! While sport has a high profile in the media, Australians also participate in a rich variety of cultural opportunities—art, film, drama, dance, ballet, music, choirs, galleries, museums, libraries, and gardens; as well as the diversity of cafés, restaurants, and wineries.

7. *Church, religions, and spirituality*: Although Australia was not founded by Christian reformers it is a myth to suggest Australia has a non-church heritage with no religious traditions. The church was present at Sydney Cove, and key founders of Melbourne were devout Christians. Churches were built on the hills or main streets of most towns, and in many ways church was central to life. It is also a myth to suggest that this is a godless society. It may be true to say that religion is not a subject Australians talk about much, but they do think about it—and religion and spirituality are defining elements of Australian culture today. However, there have been significant shifts. By the early 1980s some were wondering whether God would survive in Australia. Church attendees were aging and attendance was falling—dropping from 39 percent of the population attending monthly in 1966, to only 20 percent by 1998 (Mason, Singleton, & Webber 2007:51).

Migration has contributed significantly to major religious trends since the 1960s, including the growth of charismatic churches; the viability of some churches and survival of others, with the arrival of southern Christians; and the substantial presence of every world religion. There has also been an increasing fascination with New Age and indigenous spiritualities. But one of the most significant statistics is the increase of those recording "no religion" in the 2006 census. While churches, relying heavily upon volunteer labor, continue to make an important contribution to society, many have become disillusioned with local churches as places of transformation or spiritual growth, or alienated and hurt by clergy and church abuse. Some have had no experience in church, while others are disconnecting to experiment with simple and workplace forms of church.

Trajectory of the Future—Generation Y

In 2007 Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber published a comprehensive Australian survey of Generation Y spirituality. In

this study *spirituality* is used to denote outlook and values, whether religious or not, thus providing the basis for suggesting the directions they will take society and indicating future patterns for Australian culture.

While most Generation Ys indicate their families are “their closest source of support” (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:30), their world is vastly different from that of their parents. It is characterized by cultural pluralism, information deluge, “increased anxiety about personal and environmental risk, precarious employment, increased instability in families, rampant consumerism, greater individualization and the emergence of the ‘spiritual marketplace’” (2007:41). Four notable “social and cultural conditions” in which Generation Y are “coming of age” were identified by which their spirituality is impacted: “changing labour markets, increased instability in family arrangements; rampant consumerism; and individualization” (2007:231).

These suggest a radically changed relationship between the individual and future Australian society. Whereas sociology’s founding fathers Emile Durkheim and Max Weber “identified religion as intimately involved in the process of socialization—the process of integrating individuals into society” (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:42), fewer are now connecting with religious traditions. The status of work is being elevated as “a way of finding connectedness, community and meaning” (2007:232). Also, while their families have been “the most important agent” in their socialization, increasing instability in families and their smaller size will further “disrupt or alter” the processes of socialization for Generation Y. Hyper-consumerism is redefining leisure and determining the identity of individuals, with “self-improvement or self-knowledge . . . a form of religious expression” (2007:233-234).

Individualism, perhaps the hallmark of Generation Y, has major implications for the future of Australian society. Acknowledging “only those norms of action which are formulated in specific, limited contracts between individuals” or “‘social contracts’ in a new and limited sense,” society will no longer be regulated by universal principles or shared meaning expressed in social and religious institutions, “but by individuals who insist on their own cultural and psychological uniqueness” with ethical and political considerations framed around individual rights rather than any concept of a just society (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:43, 44).

Unquestionably environmental concerns, globalization, and national and personal security, will continue to define this changing society. AN-ZAC, along with sporting and cultural fixtures, can be expected to function as quasi-religious and national institutions. However, the heart of Australian culture and identity will be found in its multiculturalism and urbanization. The tide of multiculturalism cannot be turned back. Even if

migration policies were now changed, the future diversity of Australia is assured for many ethnics value their large families and religions—ensuring the rapid growth of both. For this reason future research could reveal a larger representation of next generations from these world religions than those interviewed by Mason, Singleton, and Webber. The experimentation of Generation Y with New Age and indigenous spiritualities could also suggest future trends. Theirs is a “‘supermarket’ approach to beliefs and morality,” with only 13 percent accepting that any one Christian denomination has a monopoly on truth (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:90, 96, 97). Current patterns of migration and demographic trends suggest a continuing decrease in those identifying themselves as Christian, with an increase in adherents to other world religions, New Age, and indigenous spiritualities.

The Gospel to be Contextualized into Australian Culture

The countercultural model seriously engages the context, but is also suspicious of context for the model is ambiguous and insufficient without the story of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. At this point it is imperative that I clarify the gospel to be contextualized in Australia’s post-Christendom culture.

The biblical concept of salvation seems foreign to the current or emerging post-Christendom culture, but while there are different ways to express it, the apostle Paul took pains to show that there is only one gospel (Gal 1:6-8 NIV, used throughout). He wrote to the Corinthians, “I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved” (1 Cor 15:1-2). He then outlined “the essential Christian message” (Keller 2008:2), “that Christ died for our sins . . . he was buried . . . he was raised on the third day . . . and that he appeared” (1 Cor 15:3-5). Paul then affirmed that the gospel preached by Peter, the Twelve, James, “all the apostles’ and himself is the same (1 Cor 15:11).

It is my intention to focus upon countercultural expressions of this gospel of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, rather than the exploration of missiological, ecclesiological, or other theological concerns more commonly treated under the gospel and culture nomenclature. It is not within the scope of this paper to debate why the “relationship between Christ’s death on the cross and human salvation” (Roennfeldt 2000:65) has been problematic for some theologians and biblical scholars, but to relate this gospel to the Australian context its essence must be determined.

While “Christ’s death has some type of salvific ‘effect’ on God, human beings, or the human situation” (Brondos 2006:7); perspectives on “the

meaning of the death of Jesus Christ,” Ray Roennfeldt observes, “arose out of differing social and cultural conditions” (2000:67). (See table 2.)

Table 2. An Overview: Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

Key idea	Culture and history	Reason for Jesus Christ’s death
Atonement	Early church fathers suffered oppression in Roman Empire	To destroy ‘tyrants’ holding people in bondage & suffering—to reconcile all
Redemption	In the time of the church fathers, a high percentage of the population were slaves	To save from ‘tyrants’ within (sin & death) by taking on fallen human nature in incarnation & death
Satisfaction	Under feudalism (in Anselm’s time, in the 11th century), many could not pay their debts	To offer up the honor & obedience to satisfy the divine justice of the ‘feudal lord’, God
Substitution	By the time of John Calvin the distinction between satisfaction and punishment was lost	To ‘pay the penalty that we deserved’—delivering us from the consequences of our sin
Example	Modernism found satisfaction in substitution unreasonable	To ‘awaken within people gratitude and love for God’.
Participation	Recent decades have reflected a culture of involvement & subjectivity	To destroy the ‘old man’ of sin & bring a ‘new man’ into existence by virtue of our participation in Christ’s death & resurrection

(Adapted from Brondos 2006:1-7; Roennfeldt 2000:66-67).

New Testament writers “used a wide variety of word pictures” to explore the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice (Roennfeldt 2000:67). While it is not wise to press every detail, Leon Morris chooses covenant, sacrifice, Day of Atonement, Passover, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, and justification as key metaphors to demonstrate that “the cross is at the heart of the Christian way”—that we are saved “by Christ’s atoning death” (Morris 1983:5, 12). (See table 3.)

Table 3. The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ Is at the Heart of the Gospel

Imagery	Each metaphor points to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ
Covenant	"Forgiveness of sin flows from his death as the sacrifice that inaugurates the new covenant" (Morris 1983:35, 36)
Sacrifice	Christ did "away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26)—and "we have been made holy" through his sacrifice "once for all" (Heb 10:10)
Day of Atonement	Christ as high priest and judge enters the Most Holy "once for all by his own blood" (Heb 9:6-14)—access into God's presence is open to us
Passover	Jesus chose the time of his death—the Passover
Redemption	God has redeemed us by suffering in our stead, bearing our curse, paying the price of our sin. Christ our kinsman, redeemer, avenger has set us free by paying the ransom price
Reconciliation	Christ's death and resurrection breaks down the barriers of enmity and hostility—restoring peace and fellowship
Propitiation	"God is angry when people sin" (Morris 1983:154). This "wrath of God" is turned away by the <i>propitiation</i> ("sacrifice of atonement") of Christ (Rom 3:25)
Justification	The justice and righteousness of God are honored and "we are reckoned as right" (Ps 51:4; Morris 1983:177, 185, 196) through the redemption and propitiation of Christ

Each metaphor confronts us with the holiness of God, the gravity of sin, and the awful cost of salvation. God is holy, righteous, and just. His character cannot be slighted. His "high standards" cannot be relaxed. His law cannot simply be "set aside." Nor can sin be ignored. It destroys a relationship with God, separating us from him. It defiles, fostering hostility and enmity between God and humanity. It produces hatred towards God (Jas 4:4). It makes us God's enemies (Rom 5:10). It enslaves us. It kills. It makes God angry. This is "not some trifle." "Sin means death (Ezek 18:4; Rom 6:23), and nothing less suffices to take it away" (Morris 1983:67).

Each metaphor proclaims the centrality of Christ's death and the unique reality that God chose to do this to himself. It was his choice to establish a new covenant based on forgiveness, flowing from his death as a sacrifice for his "covenant-breaking people" (Morris 1983:28, 32). His sacrifice was not just a demonstration of love. By his death he did something that love alone and Old Testament sacrifices could not. Morris argues, "Unless the

death of Christ really does something, it is not in fact a demonstration of love" (Morris 1983:8). God knows our helpless condition, and he initiated the plan. This provides a radical perspective on sacrifice, atonement, redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation. Our forgiveness, cleansing, freedom, reconciliation, justification, and access into the Most Holy presence of God are secured by his choice to be our ransom, sacrifice, or sin offering. This "was a calculated divine plan" (Reid and Mueller 2008:5, 7). Clearly *hilasmos* (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and *hilastērion* (Rom 3:25) encompass expiation—but it is propitiation that is needed and provided by God himself (Morris 1983:151-152). It is not to bribe or win the favor of God, for it is his favor for us that brought him to the cross (Reid and Mueller 2008:7).

In the death of Jesus Christ the holiness and justice of God, and his mercy and grace, are embraced, demonstrating the "full extent of his love" (John 13:1). It is there that we can see the full meaning of costliness (Morris 1983:67). In the crucifixion of God in Jesus is seen the ultimate in status reversal (Gorman 2001:4-7). This *upside-down* nature of God's kingdom is the theme of Matthew's Gospel, and when asked for a sign of his authority and "the kingdom of God" (Matt 12:28) Jesus would give no other evidence than "the sign of Jonah" (Matt 12:38-42; 16:1-4), the sign of his death, burial, and resurrection.

Paul's "master story" (Gorman 2004:102; Phil 2:6-11) of Christ's humiliation and crucifixion for our salvation, is the foundation of God's kingdom. This *upside-down* attitude of Christ is the value by which citizens of his kingdom live, considering "others better than" themselves and "the interests of others" above their own (Phil 2:3-4). Michael Gorman speaks of this as cruciformity (2001:4-7), the defining nature of God's kingdom. While there are both individual (inward spiritual) and corporate (social and eschatological) implications, any definition or contextualization of the gospel that disregards the whole cruciform story of God's kingdom and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the basis of this kingdom is a "different gospel" (2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6).

The Critical Task Now!

Having identified countercultural contextualization, with praxis as integral to the process, as perhaps the most effective approach to confront post-Christendom cultures with the gospel, I have sought to take both the context and the Bible seriously, while remaining duly suspicious of the culture. On the basis of this, the critical task to be undertaken in Part 2 is an analysis of areas of convergence and dissonance between the gospel and Australian culture, which will then provide a framework for suggesting fresh symbols and rituals to communicate the gospel in forms indigenous to the Australian culture.

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